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# THE TRAIL OF TAMOWENUK

By

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Beneath the wolverine-trimmed hood of his caribou-skin ahtegi Iksik's genial face expanded into a broad grin as his slant-eyed huskies tore across the crusted drifts, causing the ice-shod komatik to lean and sway as though imbued with life.

"Fasy!" cried Tamowenuk, his fur-clad wife, as she clutched desperately at the rawhide lashing which held the load of frozen caribou meat in place. "This komatik lurches like a wounded caribou."

Iksik's laugh ended in a croak of surprise. Across the whiteness of the snow-swept Barrens dark stains of smoke ascended high into the coppery sky.

"Ik-kil-lin-ik! Indians!" shrilled Tamowenuk. "Quick! turn the dogs. These Eaters of Caribou will kill us."

But Iksik had his own ideas. He'd trailed the musk-oxen inland along the Arkilinik; traded white fox pelts with the Kablunats at Fort Churchill, and once had journeyed deep into the mist-enshrouded fastnesses of the Polar ice-fields with a lone Mountie in search of an Eskimo murderer. Iksik prided himself upon being different from the rest of the Igluliks. He was an adventurer as well as a hunter, with supreme faith in his ability to take care of himself. Sending his five-fathom walrus-hide whip over the ears of his galloping team he drove straight towards the redskin camp.

"Attay! Go ahead!" shrilled the rosy-cheeked Tamowenuk, "I'm afraid that we'll have trouble. Always the Ik-kil-lin-ik

hated the Eskimos."

Ahead the snow was mottled with scrub spruce. They were nearing the Land of Little Sticks - the no-man's-land usually avoided by the Eskimos on account of the presence of their traditional enemies, the red men. Above the whiteness of the tundra arose at last the conical skin lodges of the Caribou Eaters. Hooded figures appeared here and there. Squaws ran, shouting, from lodge to lodge. Slat-ribbed Indian curs snarled angry warning. Then, into the motley horde of Indians careened the fan-shaped team of huskies yelping with delight as the swaying komatik sprayed the tawny bystanders with a cascade of glittering crystal.

For a moment Big Cheesie, mahogany-faced chief of the Caribou Eaters, surveyed his Eskimo visitors with mingled fear and amazement. If these two Eaters of Raw Flesh were bold enough to enter the camp of their ancient enemies there must be other Eskimos not far away. It would pay to be polite. So the Caribou Eaters met Iksik's friendly "Chimo!" with guttural "Bo'jou's!" and smiling faces.

That night the throb of painted tom-toms echoed far out over the frozen waters as Eskimos and Indians feasted on roasted caribou meat, and split shinbones to dig out the succulent marrow. For two days and nights the feasting continued till Iksik's huge load of meat had diminished almost to the vanishing point.

"Ho! man from the land of polar bears," ejaculated Big Cheesie as he gnawed a juicy caribou steak before the leaping flames of his lodge fire, "tomorrow we leave for Fort Fitzgerald, six sleeps towards the setting sun. Come with us and see these white men and all the riches in their wooden lodges. Truly, your heart will be gladdened."

"That is fine, Big Brother," grinned Iksik. "I will go. Have your squaws take care of my wife. She expects soon to have a child."

Hardly had the murky light of dawn crept over the empurpled reaches of the tundra than Iksik hitched the walrus-hide breast-straps about his wire-haired huskies, rubbed noses with Tamowenuk, cracked his long lash over the pointed ears of his straining team than the cavalcade was under way.

As the Eskimo's well-fed huskies continued, day after day, to outdistance the scrawny, ill-fed Indian curs the Caribou-Eaters commenced to mutter amongst themselves. Over the crusted drifts of Nonacho Lake, Tekulthli Lake and Hill Island Lake the teams sped swiftly till, at sunset the sixth day, they emerged from the forested mouth of Dog River, careened with jangling bells into the frontier settlement of Fort Fitzgerald and pulled up before the Hudson's Bay post.

The arrival of Big Cheesie and his motley braves was received by Billy Lyall, the factor, with casual disinterest. Long experience with this troublesome and predatory band had taught both he and the other traders to keep them at a respectful distance. Their furs traded, they were relegated to the squalid cabins reserved for visiting redskins, and given the customary hand-out of sowbelly, tea and hardtack.

But with Iksik it was different. Never before had the residents of Fort Fitzgerald seen an Eskimo in the flesh, and this cheerful son of the Polar spaces was received with open arms; his genial smile unlocking the doors of every cabin and trading post in the settlement. He was fed on food and delicacies he'd never dreamed

existed. Presents of white man's clothing, knives, scissors, needles and shining axes were heaped upon him although he had no furs.

Back in the Indian cabins the mutterings of Big Cheesie's Caribou Eaters became more rabid. Why had they brought this Eater of Raw Flesh to see the whites, only to be ignored themselves while he was feted? Deeply the spears of jealousy stabbed into their hearts. But Iksik, warmed by the kindliness of these Kablunats, and absorbed with his glittering treasures, failed to notice the signs of the impending storm. Instead, his mind was occupied with the wonderful stories he'd have to tell Tamowenuk when he returned to the smoky lodges of the tribesmen.

Not till they were driving eastward along the forested shores of Lady Grey Lake did Iksik realize that anything was amiss. Eskimo-like, he made no comment, preserving an implacable, imperterbable calm in the face of lowering brows and scowling looks.

But it wasn't in Caribou Eater nature to long resist the temptation to take advantage of one apparently weaker than themselves. From scowls they turned to jibes and insulting gestures. They laughed at the way he ate his food. They ridiculed the way he fondled his sharp-eared huskies. Then, as they kindled a blazing campfire on the crest of a rocky ridge one night, Big Cheesie resorted to open taunts. "No one who called himself a man," leered the savage, "would eat from the same pot as his dogs." A burst of raucous laughter greeted this sally. "Any man who so eats acts," continued Cheesie, warmed by the approval of his companions, "must have been sired by a dog himself."

Quickly Iksik rose from the stone on which he had been sitting and slipped down the steep bank towards the frozen creek.

followed by the jeering laughter of his companions. Above him the Indians were silhouetted clearly against the leaping flames of the campfire. Their ribald laughter still echoed over the rocks when the staccato reverberations of a rifle suddenly echoed through the ravine. Far below the purple darkness was stabbed by livid spears of flame. As Iksik's Winchester spat fire the Caribou Eaters cavorted in fear and anguish as they attempted to avoid the leaden pellets. Leaping for the protection of adjacent boulders they yelled to the Eskimo to desist.

At last the shooting ceased. But Iksik did not show up. As though the earth had swallowed him he disappeared completely. All night the Indians shivered in the biting cold behind the rocks and boulders, fearful of replenishing the fire lest they again become targets for the Eskimo's bullets.

Having attended to their wounded the dejected and dispirited redskins pulled out at daylight for their lodges, hauling their "heroes" on toboggans, their courage far below the zero mark.

There was but one way to wipe out the stain of this affront - to take it out on the defenseless Tamowenuk!

Screaming squaws greeted their return with word that Tamowenuk had become a mother a couple of days before. Angrily they turned upon the defenseless woman, driving her, sobbing, from the camp with neither food nor weapons - her naked infant nestling in the furred hood of her koolitan. Her protests availed her nothing. They seemed only to add fuel to the bitter hatred that burned in the breasts of the motley Caribou Eaters, who made the stunted spruce woods ring with their taunting laughter as her heart-rending cries came echoing back across the frozen tundra.

Between the spot where the Caribou Eaters had cast Tamowenuk away, and the homes of her Iglulik people on the sterile shores of Hudson Bay, lay, in stark and utter isolation, seven hundred miles of treeless, blizzard-swept, snow-covered tundra. Not a stick, a not a tree, not even a solitary hill was there to break the dread monotony of whiteness. Inhabited only by the Arctic hare, the white fox, the gaunt wolf and the migratory caribou, the unutterable lonliness of this vast, illimitable land of Cain dulled one's very soul and stultified the mind.

But the Stone Age mother came of a race renowned for its courage and resourcefulness. Now and then she clubbed an Arctic hare. Coming across a partly-devoured caribou pulled down by ravening wolves, and not yet frozen, she feasted on the raw, red meat. From one of the bones she made a knife, and from a rib and a piece of driftwood fashioned a spear. Other bones she made into fish-hooks, while from the skin and sinews she manufactured snares and fishlines.

Spearing an occasional caribou; snaring the odd ptarmigan and Arctic hare; fishing where swift water had prevented ice from forming, she made her way slowly across the dismal Barrens. When assailed by biting blizzards from the Pole she erected a snow igloo, using her bone knife to cut the snow-blocks, warming it with a blubber lamp contrived from a curved rock in which she burned caribou grease for fuel, striking a light from a metal ornament on her dress and a flint picked up in the Barrens.

In spring she awaited the caribou migration at a crossing on the Dubwant, speared a dozen or more as they swam the stream in countless thousands, jerked the meat and hauled it behind her on a roughly-improvised sled. Nearly a year after being cast away by

Big Cheesie and his redskin rascals she trudged into a huddle of dome-shaped igloos, her child alive and kicking in her hood. It was the village of her people!

But what had happened to Iksik? Inquiries at neighbouring camps, and at the Hudson's Bay post at Chesterfield Inlet, proved fruitless. Had he succumbed to icy blizzards that swept those awesome Barrens over which she'd fought such a desperate flight? Or, had he fallen victim to hunger and starvation, for the wolves and foxes to gnaw his bones?

A month later the Igluliks departed to hunt for caribou. The weeks slipped by then loud shouts arising above the howling of the wind announced the return of the hunters. Crawling through the snow tunnels, women and children observed shadowy figures fighting their way through the swirling curtain of spinning flakes. But there were six in the party instead of five! Who was the other man? Suddenly Tamowenuk emitted a hoarse croak of delight and catapulted forward. A moment later she was in the arms of the attenuated, but still smiling, Iksik.

Exactly six months after Tamowenuk had been cast so heartlessly away Big Cheesie and his braves stampeded into Fort Fitzgerald. Ragged and starving, they sought out Inspector Anderson at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police barracks on the hill. "The Eskimos," they cried, "they've driven us from their hunting grounds. Wherever we go they haunt us, skulking among the rocks and gullies, waiting for a chance to kill us. All the way into the fort these Eaters of Raw Flesh have dogged our trail. Give us food," they whined, "our squaws and children are starving."

A few days later Constables Grinstead and Baker escorted the terror-stricken redskins back to their hunting grounds to

investigate. Not a sign of an Eskimo was anywhere to be seen. Haunted by their guilty consciences, the Caribou Eaters had simply developed a case of nerves, seeing an imaginary Eskimo in every rock and shadow. Fearful of being attacked by vengeful enemies they'd been afraid to hunt and trap; abandoned everything in a frenzy of fear, and almost starved in their precipitate flight to carry their troubles to the Mounted Police.

To-day Iksik and Tamowenuk still live, and hunt, happily in their Polar home near Hudson Bay. But to this day Big Cheesie's Caribou Eaters haunt the outskirts of Fort Fitzgerald, ragged and hungry; afraid to return to their erstwhile hunting grounds, where caribou are plentiful, lest the vengeance of the Eskimos be visited upon them.

Note: The details of this story were given the writer by Inspector Anderson, ("Andy"), of the R.C.M.Police in 1921, just after these events occurred. Later, on an exploratory journey by dog-team through the Caribou Eater hunting grounds, he also heard Big Cheesie's version. P.H.G.